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**THE LARGEST PERM VKONTAKTE GROUPS: RE-OPENING
THE CITY**

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of one of a kind of Perm new city media, such as groups in *Vkontakte* social network (which is still the most popular and significant network in Russia). These media are interpreted primarily in the framework of the category "urban-oriented media", which is just entering into scientific use. Addressing to the largest city communities as "My City Perm", "Overheard Perm", "Perm Active", we analyze their role in city space, their influence on the inhabitants of the city, their importance in perception of urban realities. To solve research problems, we used *Popsters*, a special analytical service, which allows to compare and analyze the effectiveness of community publications in social networks in such parameters as quantity of friends, posts, likes, reposts, comments, views, average percent of followers' daily engagement and so on. A comprehensive assessment of the involvement of the audience, reflecting the potential of forming communities around the media resource, is given. Study also shows as this modern media which "make the city speak", help the citizen to re-open it as a place of comfortable, interesting, bright living. It is based on interviews, which were given of leaders of their groups, overview of structures, contents and statistics of these groups.

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Keywords: Perm, social networks, urban oriented media.



1. Introduction

This study refers to the largest groups of Perm in the *VKontakte*. According to *BrandAnalytics* research, *VKontakte* is still the most important social network in Russia (Social Networks in Russia: Numbers and Trends, Autumn 2018, 2018). *Facebook* is more popular in the capitals of the country, *Odnoclassniki* now is perceived as network for rather aged people, as well as *Instagram* is more for fashionable urban women. But if we take Russia as a whole, *VKontakte* is the leader between all networks both by a number of posts and by a number of active authors; it also has the biggest audience.

1.1. Role of the *VKontakte's* groups for the country communities

If we ignore the capitals and the biggest cities, we would see what *VKontakte* groups play very important role in an information space of the country: in fact, they are not only inform, but unite, impact on city communities and even change urban environment. Apparently, there are two main types of *VKontakte* groups: informational (with names like «My City ...», «Your City ...», «Typical ...», «Emergency ...») – with main goal to inform residents, and communicational (with names like «Overheard») – with main goal to promote community communication) (Pustovalov, 2018, p. 431).

Such groups emerged in a unique period for the country (2008–2013), at the end of Dmitriy Medvedev's presidency. D. Medvedev was known as blogging and social network adherent. Almost all the main Perm groups were created in 2011, just in this period. And now they are often the main players in their area of a province information market and often determine the agenda of local audience. Current president, Putin (2018), during VIII Moscow Urban Forum "Megapolis of the Future. New space for life" emphasized, that "any city can successfully develops only together with its residents, considering their opinions, their initiatives, when strong institutions of direct democracy and local self-government, effective communication mechanisms with people do work" (para. 41). It means what *VKontakte* groups, as a mean of democracy and local self-government, now matter even more.

1.2. Paradigms of understanding of *VKontakte* groups

We can relate them to **community media**, which is "operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community" (Tabing, 2002, p. 11), and "set out to create an alternative both to national public broadcasters, which are often under government control, and to private commercial media, ...provide communities with access to information and voice, facilitating community-level debate, information and knowledge sharing and input into public decisionmaking" (Buckley, 2011, p. 7). Furthermore, since content of the groups is selected, edited, made by average people, citizens of the city, not professional journalists, we can relate this phenomenon to **Citizen Journalism** (2019) and, treating more widely, to **participatory journalism** (Lasica, 2003).

2. Problem Statement

Russian researchers address not so long ago to the problem of the effectiveness of the presence of media groups in social networks (first of all, *VKontakte*). This problem is somehow studied in an aspect of a presence in the social networks of local traditional media – newspapers, radio, TV (Antipina, 2017; Hradziushka, 2015; Nemchinova, 2016). There is also a good study of how world public service media

deliver news via social media for example (Sehl, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2018). But the issue of the effectiveness of the presence of citizen, non-professional groups in *Vkontakte* – on the same informational field with groups of professional media – is fairly new and not well researched (Pustovalov, 2017).

Researchers Abashev and Pechishchev (2018) recently put into use the term "urban-oriented media", defining them as "media projects, united by the problems of the modern city and uniting activists studying and developing urban space" (p. 202). They related to such media Moscow's "The Village", St. Petersburg's "Bumaga", «Sib.fm» in Novosibirsk, «It's My Sity» in Ekaterinburg, «Downtown» in Voronezh, «Bigvill» in Samara, «Provincia» in Irkutsk, «NN-Stories» в Nizhny Novgorod, "Zvezda" in Perm and so on (p. 204).

But the question to what extent can we relate to the urban-oriented media the largest citizen groups of *Vkontakte* still remains unsolved. And we may start to solve it, when we understand:

- a place of this groups in the city's informational space;
- do they affect it;
- what do they write about.

3. Research Questions

3.1. *Vkontakte* citizen groups – are they true urban media?

How effectively do citizen *Vkontakte* groups work with the audience – in comparison with professional news media groups? What level of interactions and involvement of the audience Perm citizen and news media groups can show, fulfilling the task of meeting the information and communication needs of the local community? Are urban issues, which they raise in their publications, modern and actual?

3.2. *Vkontakte* citizen groups – are they true participatory media?

Above we related these groups to *participatory media*. But can we surely say that these groups are a part of participatory culture, where the citizens do not act as consumers only, but also as contributors or producers – of news and even city space (in Lefebvre's (1991) sense).

4. Purpose of the Study

In our research we make a comparison of the three largest groups of the three most important sectors on *Vkontakte*. In order to make the study more objective, we compare three citizen groups with the three groups of the largest online portals, as well as with the three largest groups of Perm newspapers.

It was important to us to put in one row the citizen, non-professional (in fact – amateur) groups of community news makers and the groups which lead by professional journalists. Our purpose is:

4.1. To find out which kind of groups is better with their communication with the audience

- which news more often viewed,
- cause more interactions,
- and thus, more influential.

4.2. To find out which groups have bigger potential to stimulate changes in urban environment.

5. Research Methods

In this study we used different methods to achieve our purpose.

5.1. Searching and selection of the largest groups in each of the three selected sectors

To make this, we use the internal search engine of *Vkontakte*. In each sector (citizen groups, online information portal groups, newspaper groups) we see three largest groups.

5.2. Receiving group statistics using "Popsters" service

"Popsters" is the analytical service, which allows to get statistics on groups and accounts in 12 main world social networks which can be actual in Russia (*Vkontakte*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Telegram*, *Twitter*, *Odnoclassniki*, *YouTube*, *Tumblr*, *Pinterest*, *Coub*, *Google+*, *Flickr*).

Using it, we obtaine such data (end of February, 2018) for selected groups as:

- date of creation (date of publication of a first post of a group);
- quantity of friends (subscribers), posts, likes, reposts, comments, views;
- ER Day (engagement rate by day: sum of likes, reposts, comments for a taken period, divided by number of friends and then divided by the number of days for a taken period) (Engagement rate: how to count the coefficient of involvement in social networks, 2017).

For each selected group we analyze the entire period of its existence, which allowe to get a full information of its work and interactions and to compare all groups of selected type with each other (and then to compare all types with each other).

5.3. Studying structure and the most demanded news of the groups

We supplemente the statistical analysis of the groups by referring to their structure and news. "Popsters" allows to find the most demanded news, so we were able to estimate their subjects and to see how the news can satisfy the informational and communicational needs of the communities.

5.4. Studying of interviews of leaders and contributors of the groups

Preparing for this study, we communicated with main peoples of the groups, taking 4 interviews. An information, which we got from them, helped us to build an overall picture of Perm citizen groups.

6. Findings

6.1. Social networks as a result of youth choice

Characterizing a creative urban youth, the main urban-oriented media audience, Abashev and Pechishchev (2018) in their work "Local online media as agents of urbanization" emphasized, that "social networks from the very beginning were actively used place for them". As they supposed, using "social networks as a preferable point of entry" for this youth "indirectly characterizes their sociocultural quality" (p. 208).

Obviously, for a significant part of this audience social networks are not only preferable, but also the only entry point to the local information field: these people, who moved from newspapers and television during their growing up, chose them – instead of online information portals and newspapers. This choice is explained by the fact that social networks are a more convenient platform for them: a consumption of information is constantly combined there with its discussion, a possibility of expression of their opinion on one or another occasion.

6.2. The city and VKontakte citizen groups

In a table 1 below ("Statistics of the VKontakte citizen groups") we can see data, obtained by the service "Popsters". For starters, we can compare population of Perm (about a million residents) with a quantity of friends (subscribers) of the largest citizen groups.

Leader group, "My City Perm" is the oldest Perm community (<https://vk.com/vikiperm>). It has almost 400 thousand friends (it is 40 % of the million), their number is growing constantly. And we can partly agree with Alexander Ivanov, the head of the group, that it has no rivals. As he said to an interview, given to us, his group "is a place for communication of people who have an opinion about life in Perm. This is the best place to find like-minded people – a meeting place for those who cute and smart."

"My City Perm" is in close friendship with the second group, "Overheard Perm" (<https://vk.com/podslushanoperm>, 365 thousands of friends): they exchange meaningful informational newsbreaks and has united advertising package (see post of their commercial offer: https://vk.com/av.kotov90?z=photo353084835_456243147%2Fphotos353084835). The main content of this group is the same as in other groups ("Overheard" as communication type of groups) is stories, confessions, disclosures, questions, rumors, memes, photos of interesting places, events, animals, nature, etc. An opportunity to share such things with other members of the community is very important for many of its participants. It is available to people of the country only in recent years, although the need for it, as we think, has always been before.

A branch of "MCP" is a group "Affiche. My city Perm" (<https://vk.com/vikipermafisha>) as well as "Try your luck, Perm" (<https://vk.com/udachaperm>) and "The Real Kray" (<https://vk.com/krasivayaperm>); "MCP" is in good terms with many other Perm groups ("New Perm", "History of Perm", "Looking for you. Dating in Perm", "Football club "Amkar" Perm") and others.

The structure of "My City Perm" we can call exemplary for all Perm Krai groups and this is something that news media groups may learn from it – if they want to increase the number of their friends and keep them interested. We find there bright news feed, where all the news has a lot of likes, reposts, they often provoke a lot of comments. "The news itself is not so valuable", Alexander Ivanov supposes. "Valuable is how this news was discussed by our users! News are copyable, discussions are unique – as is every person in our community!" High level of discussion distinguishes this group from Perm news media groups. Continuation of this feature we see at huge discussion section: 333 discussion(!) are here, many of them are dynamic and alive.

Then we see photo section with 73 838 photos(!!!), divided into 484 albums (phenomena and events of Perm: "Perm girls", "Perm boys", "Dancing Perm", "Day of the city", "The duty of the city", contests "About the city and about me" and "Frozen beauty", festivals and holidays "Sky Fair", "Wings of Parma", "Kupala nights", "White nights", Perm concerts of "Limp Bizkit", "Scorpions", "30 Second to

Mars", albums of New Years, St. Valentine's Days, proms, September 1s, May 9s, and so on), video section with 3 206 videos, divided into 28 albums ("Perm street musicians", "Tigers frolic in the Perm zoo", "Perm Deadpool", "Sad face on Kama", "The Terminator in Perm", "Skibidi challenge – Cheerleading Perm " and so on).

It is noteworthy that the Perm patriotism is perceived in these albums not as just a local, parochial, but as a cosmopolitan, global – patriotism of citizens of the universe, who keeps abreast of the world (Perm concerts of "Limp Bizkit", "Scorpions", "30 Second to Mars", "Perm Deadpool", "The Terminator in Perm", "Skibidi challenge – Cheerleading Perm ").

Table 01. Statistics of the *VKontakte* citizen groups

Group	Created	Friends	Posts	Likes	Reposts	Comments	Views	ERday
<i>My City Perm</i>	15.3.2011	392 944	49 723	14 658 829	1 241 043	1 949 948	592 862 557	1.566%
<i>Overheard Perm</i>	17.7.2015	365 261	50 480	12 182 873	280 084	4 623 112	971 187 489	3.555%
<i>Perm Active</i>	14.9.2011	206 664	94 525	13 028 064	684 440	1 578 927	387 114 497	2.722%

"Perm Active" (<https://vk.com/permactive>), which has more than 200 thousand friends, is the third Perm group. "We're not the first in numbers, but the first in activity. Not in vain that we are *Perm Active!*" – claimed Maxim Kipreev, an editor of the group.

It's hard to argue: he has the point. The group was created by known Perm activist Artyom Feoktistov in September of 2011 as community for funny flash mobs, which were supported by many creative and peppy youngsters; these events are a core of the whole community to this day.

The city's people know such offline events (now they became regular) as "Bubble Show", "Wet Massacre", "Snow Massacre", "Parade of Superheroes" and so on, though some of them even don't suspect, that "Perm Active" is their initiator.

Current slogan of the group is "We'll tell, we'll help, we'll distribute on the city". In the group structure there are such headings as "Good morning", "PermiansTravel", "Perm Creative", "Articles" and so on. The group has 6 102 photos, divided into 29 albums, and 977 photos, divided into 15 albums, (in the same way as in "My city Perm", phenomena and events of the city are reflected here).

Like "My City Perm", "Perm Active" is in friendship with other bid group in a field of exchanging meaningful informational newsbreaks, it is "Permians. Overheard Perm" (<https://vk.com/permyaky>). Such characteristic as cooperation of two groups, informational and communicational, is a good feature of the largest Perm groups, which conduces them to figure out more issues and to cover more aspects of the activity. In addition, "PA" is a single economic entity with such groups as "Permians", "PermVKontakte", "Auto Perm", "Perm Affiche", "Affiche Perm", "Perm Online", "Live Perm", "Where to go in Perm", "Typical Perm", "Perm Life", which allows to cover about 70% percent of the Perm audience of "VKontakte" (see post of their commercial offer: https://vk.com/market-64395252?w=product-64395252_544809%2Fquery).

On the example of this group we can clearly see that this kind of media may solve the problem of uniting different people of the city: it became a platform where various – large and small – communities of Perm meet and communicate.

There are anime, cosplay, role-playing games, historical reenactment, football fans, bikers, motor-car enthusiasts, music lovers and so on; each "Perm Active" collaborator is a participant of such informal associations. This problem could not be solved by old preinternet media – newspapers, TV, radio, and often new Internet news media often do not consider it as a priority for them. Informal news and informal communication – these qualities help "Perm Active" in solving it. The group is trying to do this "in a more positive and funny way than other groups or media", as Maxim Kipreev says.

6.3. The city and VKontakte news media groups

Now let's see statistics of VKontakte groups of Perm information portals ("59.ru", "Perm News", "ProPerm") and newspapers ("Vcourse.ru", "Komsomolskaya Pravda – Perm", "Business Class") in the table 2 below. It includes the same items as the table of the citizen groups.

Table 02. Statistics of the VKontakte information portals' and newspapers' groups

Group	Created	Friends	Posts	Likes	Reposts	Comments	Views	ERday
59.ru	29.8.2011	205 812	49 758	1 689 588	207 526	450 874	242 109 474	0.417%
Perm News	02.12.2011	58 682	28 488	503 632	79 123	113 127	35 155 168	0.449%
ProPerm	27.2.2011	29 205	19 953	135 102	21 345	40 605	15 455 095	0.231%
Vcourse.ru	11.9.2014	25 017	28 387	168 322	22 706	33 526	27 631 916	0.552%
KP – Perm	03.8.2011	14 976	18 848	112 321	18 178	14 637	12 992 102	0.351%
Business Class	07.6.2011	4 581	11 398	89 227	4 613	4 416	2 441 968	0.761%

It is noteworthy that both citizen groups and news media groups were created at about the same time – 2011 year (only "Overheard Perm" in 2015 and "Vcourse" in 2014). And it means that all of them were approximately equal conditions in such democratic and friendly environment as a social network "VKontakte" (if we neglect the fact that information portals and newspapers are the professional news makers and initially know how to do it better than ordinary citizens in citizen groups).

But, as we notice even at first glance, citizen groups work with their audience much more actively (interactively). For example, we can compare the third from citizen groups with the first from news media groups. "Perm Active" and "59.ru" group were born close to each other (14.9.2011 and 29.8.2011), they have close number of friends (206K and 205K), they have comparable quantity of total views (387M and 242M). And "59.ru" group is objectively the best from the news media groups and one of the best in the city. But "Perm Active" is twice more active in number of posts, has eight times more likes, three times more reposts and comments.

Other news media groups are deplorably far behind from citizen groups – in quantity of friends, posts, likes, reposts, comments, views. This lag is especially noticeable in the newspaper groups. Obviously, the information portals' groups, not having a spare platform, try hard to succeed online, while the newspapers, which have print version, first of all reckon on it, trying to squeeze everything possible from the paper form, and still don't take seriously their online platforms.

Inability (or unwillingness?) to work with the audience of news media groups reflects such indicator as engagement rate (in our variant – it is engagement rate by day, which shows average percentage of active people per day of the whole number of subscribers). In the case of the citizen groups it is more than 1.5 % (1.566%, 3.555%, 2.722%); but in the case of the news media groups it is in all

times less than 1 % (0.417%, 0.449%, 0.231%, 0.552%, 0.351%, 0.761%). And it means again that news media groups can learn a lot from citizen groups.

6.4. Citizen groups: re-opening the city

"The most valuable part of the news is the material sent by our users" –Alexander Ivanov from "MCP" declare. Indeed, a significant part of the news materials (stories, accidents, announcements, photos, etc.) in the largest groups of Perm is created by their users. Authors of «Strelka Magazine» suppose that this kind of publications "make the city speak" (Tumarkina, 2017). And slogan of "Perm Active" "We'll tell, we'll help, we'll distribute on the city", which can be fit to other citizen groups – is just the case when the news operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community (Tabing, 2002, p. 11).

Certainly, we are dealing here with participatory journalism (Lasica, 2003) and even more – with part of participatory culture, where the citizens do not act as consumers only, but also as contributors or producers; citizens even able to participate in city design and planning, as Sanoff (2015) shows.

Attention, approval of Perm residents support – in posts and comments – different places, objects, attractions and give another sight, another vision of them. This online support of offline phenomena is keenly felt. Among the most popular publications in the two main groups are: countless posts about inscription on Kama embankment with giant letters "Happiness is not behind mountains" ("Happiness is not far away" – may be all Russia now saw it); love remake of this inscription of big letters near Perm "Nastya, be my wife" ("Настя будь моей женой"); a heart made of teachers' figures as an expression of feelings to pupils of school №82; a portrait of Uriy Shevchuk made of maple leaves on a house wall; many shots of beautiful Perm places and art objects; reviews of places, lakes, waterfalls of the Perm region, where you should definitely visit (and then – a review of art objects and places in another countries); "Revizorro" – critical review of Perm services in different areas; "Perm trolley bases gained emotions!" – series of shots of their fronts with painted smiles, and so on. Each of these posts is a small or big story written by citizens and retold by them to themselves.

The informal, sincere, self-made story about the city is what citizens value in such groups.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Citizen groups: the ability to work with the audience

As we can see, the two main groups, "My City Perm" and "Perm Active" are media organisms of new type. Each of them is a flagship of a big fleet of Perm groups, and they cover most of the city's "VKontakte" users. There are two large systems of news making and working with the audience, and the last thing is often the main for them (A. Ivanov: "News are copyable, discussions are unique. Valuable is how this news was discussed by our users!").

7.2. Citizen groups: a lesson to learn

The structure and the news of those groups may show how to work more effectively with the Perm audience. Really, they can do it much better than news media groups (both of information portals and of newspapers). Even just eye comparison of these two types of groups shows it. And statistics distinctly

reveal that they exceed these groups in such indicators as the number of friends, posts, likes, reposts, comments, views, engagement rate.

When we compared the best news media group ("59.ru") and with the third citizen group ("Perm Active"), which are close in the creation date and the friends' quantity, we saw that the citizen one is twice more active in number of posts, has three times more reposts and comments, eight times more likes.

Other news media groups are deplorably far behind from citizen groups – in all indicators.

Probably news media people pay more attention to the news itself, rather than how to make the audience to react to it. The experience of Berezniki, the second largest city of the Perm Krai, confirms this assumption in a certain sense: in two main citizen groups of the city created at the same time ("Typical Berezniki" and "All Berezniki"), group led by a professional journalist ("All Berezniki") has much less users' interactions and lower engagement rate by day than other group led by an average citizen.

7.3. Citizen groups: "a meeting place for those who cute and smart"

"Cuteness", "smartness", which A. Ivanov sees in citizen groups, really makes them a meeting place for creative, vigorous and bright people ("best place to find like-minded people"). They themselves create and reflect the creativity of others – we see how city space is producing in huge amount of posts, comments, discussions.

If it was customary to speak in past ages that the newspapers – are chronicles of our time; today we can say that content of such groups in social networks is a living, alternative history, which is creating "in a more positive and funny way" M. A. Kipreev (personal communication, May 24, 2018). (M. Kipreev).

7.4. Citizen groups: production of the city space

As we saw in this study that citizen groups, being urban-oriented media, participate in a process that French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Lefebvre (1991) called "production of space" – production not just in material, but in a virtual, spiritual way.

It matters that significant part of the news materials (stories, accidents, announcements, photos, etc.) in the largest groups of Perm is created by their users. Attention, approval of Perm residents support – in posts and comments – different places, objects, attractions, it also give another sight, another vision of them. And this really "makes the city speak": each of these posts is a small or big story written by citizens and retold by them to themselves.

They re-open the city, creating their own image, their own perception of it, which is unlike those which are created by traditional news media.

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